Youth Engagement in Practice

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Photo Credit: After School Matters

As we work together with youth to re-engage and reconnect, youth development organizations are partnering with youth in authentic, meaningful ways. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) interviewed six youth development organizations in Chicago to learn about their youth engagement strategies. This brief highlights lessons learned and real-life examples for practitioners seeking practical youth engagement strategies.

What does youth engagement mean? Several definitions and frameworks exist for youth engagement.[1] In this brief, we refer to the U.S. Agency for International Development's definition of youth engagement as "an inclusive, intentional, mutually respectful partnership between youth and adults whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people's ideas, perspectives, skills, and strengths are integrated into the design and delivery of programs, strategies, policies, funding mechanisms and organizations."[2]

Why does youth engagement matter? Young people are the experts of their own lived experiences.[3] Youth engagement is a "win-win proposition"—it benefits young people, adults, and organizations.[4] **Youth** benefit from meaningful opportunities that foster learning and help them develop skills, habits, mindsets, and identities.[5] **Adults** can enhance their own competencies, learn to better understand and value youth,

AIR would like to thank these organizations for sharing their practices.

About Face Theatre's programming seeks to increase the safety, empowerment, and leadership capacity of LGBTQIA youth, and to catalyze youth-led civic dialogue and action within schools and communities.

After School Matters provides Chicago teens the opportunity to explore their passions and develop their talents through world-class after-school and summer programs across Chicago.

Free Spirit Media provides teens and young adults in communities of color on Chicago's West and South sides with a comprehensive foundation in media literacy and hands-on media production experience.

MAPSCorps trains youth to produce high-quality data about community assets that everyone can use to improve the human condition.

Mikva Challenge supports educators and young people across the country with Action Civics curricula and programming that help youth develop skills and become involved community leaders.

Museum of Science and Industry builds bridges between youth and science, both inside and outside the classroom.

and increase their commitment to their organizations.[6] **Organizations** can develop services that are more relevant and responsive to young people's strengths and challenges.

This brief provides five youth engagement strategies:

- Prepare youth and adults to be successful
- Build community and positive relationships
- Design meaningful opportunities
- Value young people's time and contributions
- Embrace a culture of vulnerability

Photo Credit: Mikva Challenge

Prepare Youth and Adults to Be Successful

Adults should engage in detailed planning to ensure that young people can be successful.[7] Making space for young people to lead does not mean adults do not do anything—adults are essential for planning and contributing to meaningful experiences and opportunities. For example, About Face Theatre staff have specific goals for the experiences they design for young people, as well as roadmaps for reaching those goals, which include lesson plans, curricula, and charts. Then young people make the plans their own.

Adults should involve youth in planning activities from the beginning. From the initial stages of program design, Free Spirit Media incorporates feedback from youth participants to create programs that reflect their interests. For example, staff convene a core group of young people as part of their ongoing strategic planning process to ensure that the organization's goals and priorities are aligned with young people's visions for Free Spirit Media's work. Youth and staff also work together to develop new ideas for programs, review curricula, and pitch their program plans to other youth.

Organizations must prepare adults to effectively support young people. After School Matters builds a culture that recognizes the contributions of young people, promotes adaptive instruction (i.e., instructional strategies and resources to meet the learning needs of individuals), and supports adults in approaching youth with authenticity and vulnerability. The organization provides professional development and individualized coaching for staff. Youth participants also lead workshops for instructors (e.g., on adultism, engagement in a remote environment), allowing these young people to enrich professional development for staff while also feeling that their insights are valued.

Photo Credit: MAPSCorps

Build Community and Positive Relationships

Build a community for all youth.[8] Adults and young people can work together to set norms and goals. About Face Theatre recently launched the [Green Room Collective](#): Youth members of the collective work alongside About Face Theatre staff to create agreements to guide their work (such as "assume good intentions" and "every voice is important and necessary"). Norms and agreements ensure that young people and adults understand how they will interact with each other and resolve conflicts.

Foster a sense of belonging and interdependency. Adults and youth at MAPSCorps co-develop policy recommendations to improve public health outcomes in their community. Each young person joins a group (policy, data and visualization, and community research and historical change) that is responsible for one aspect of the recommendations. The collaboration fosters a sense of belonging and interdependency because everyone has a role, and their contribution serves their community.

Develop positive relationships. Feedback from youth participants in programs at the Museum of Science and Industry highlights the importance of the adult–youth relationship for building community. For example, adults "struck a comfortable balance between being a friend and an authority figure, and they demonstrated respect for youth by enforcing the rules and holding youth to high standards, while also giving them responsibility and voice in decision-making."[9]

Design Meaningful Opportunities

Use a variety of methods to gather youth input and perspectives. At times, After School Matters collects youth input more frequently or quickly to make timely and important program decisions. They capitalize on technology to collect rapid feedback, such as pulse surveys, Mentimeter polls, and use it to touch base. Free Spirit Media uses surveys to collect anonymous input from youth who may not be comfortable sharing feedback in other ways.

Consider young people's developmental needs.[10] At the Museum of Science and Industry, engagement of elementary and middle school youth focuses on building awareness of science content,

life skills, and confidence. Engagement of high school youth emphasizes leadership, career development, and individualized opportunities.

Photo Credit: Mikva Challenge

Let young people focus on the topics and activities that matter most to them. Mikva Challenge convened the Juvenile Justice Council to identify strategies for Cook County to develop alternative approaches to juvenile detention and prosecution. The Council met with state agencies and with community-based organizations that offer alternatives to detention. The Council's recommendations reflected the thoughts of youth who have had direct touchpoints with the juvenile justice system, and focused on decreasing recidivism rates in youth, implementing trauma-informed practices, and cultivating holistic wraparound services in the juvenile court.[11]

Value Young People's Time and Contributions

Do something with young people's recommendations. Mikva Challenge prioritizes responding to and following up on young people's recommendations. Adults must acknowledge they requested input, share what they did with that input, and how they will continue to engage with young people. MAPSCorps demonstrates the value of young people's work by making the research performed by young people publicly available to others (such as doctors, social workers, and community planners).

Provide stipends to young people. Stipends communicate the value of young people's time, reduce barriers to program participation, and provide additional supports to families and communities. An After School Matters policy brief highlights the critical role stipends play in young people's engagement. Stipends can address issues of access and equity for low-income youth from underrepresented backgrounds, who must choose between programs and part-time jobs to address basic needs or support their families.

Embrace a Culture of Vulnerability

Become an organization that listens to youth, asks questions, and is okay with being uncomfortable. About Face Theatre emphasizes not being overly committed to plans, because youth may have very different needs and ideas than expected. The organization might need to adapt, which can be uncomfortable, but will ultimately lead to better results because it is youth driven.

Recognize that youth engagement is for the whole organization. The Museum of Science and Industry plans to integrate youth engagement across departments within the museum, not just the youth development department. For example, youth might provide feedback on museum exhibits or work

with marketing on how to share youth development opportunities for youth and professional learning opportunities for adults.

Putting It All Together

The organizations we highlight in this brief provide examples of how youth development organizations engage youth in authentic, practical ways. Youth development organizations can:

Photo Credit: MAPSCorps

- Prepare youth for success by developing goals, lesson plans, or curricula for youth engagement, but involve youth in planning from the beginning and allow youth to make those plans their own. Prepare adults for success by providing the training and tools they need to effectively support youth engagement.

- Build community by establishing a supportive environment that fosters a sense of belonging, interdependency, and positive relationships between adults and youth.

- Design meaningful opportunities for youth to engage in multiple ways and to engage in developmentally appropriate activities and topics that are important to them and relevant to their lived experiences.

- Value the time and contributions of young people by taking their recommendations seriously and providing a stipend.

- Embrace an organizational culture of vulnerability, where adults listen to young people, even when it is uncomfortable. Recognize that youth engagement is for the whole organization, not just the youth development department.

We plan to continue collecting and sharing examples of how youth-serving organizations can engage youth in programming and organizational efforts.

Check out additional resources at the links below!

- Youth Engaged for Change
- Youth-Adult Partnerships
- Act for Youth
- A Conversation with Chicago Teens About Youth Engagement

About the Readiness Projects

With an unwavering focus on youth potential, the Readiness Projects advance work informed by science and grounded in practice, supporting adults in all settings and systems across the diverse youth fields. The Forum for Youth Investment, the National Urban League, and the American Institutes for Research have united to devote our time, resources, and perspectives to stimulate equity-driven solutions and policies. With partners, we will accelerate work that demands equitable learning and development opportunities and builds on the strengths of people working at all levels to help children, youth, and young adults thrive.

Endnotes

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